BUILDING BLOCKS

Framework for a National Strategy on Violence Against Women

Adopted by
Federal/Provincial/Territorial
Ministers Responsible for the
Status of Women at their
Tenth Annual Conference
St. John's, Newfoundland

June 1991

BUILDING BLOCKS:

FRAMEWORK FOR A NATIONAL STRATEGY

ON

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Violence and the threat of violence continue to deprive many women of their ability to achieve full equality in Canadian society.

In May 1990 at Lake Louise, Alberta, federal, provincial and territorial Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women issued a declaration on violence against women which recognizes that:

- Violence against women is a crime and punishable under the law.
- Women are entitled to live in a safe environment.
- Offenders must be held accountable for their behaviour.
- The elimination of violence against women requires a response including prevention, public education, services and enforcement of the law.
- Every individual, community and government in Canada must do everything possible to help the women, children and families affected by violence; we must all work together to achieve a society free from violence.

The Ministers agreed to develop and promote strategies to eliminate this violence within their jurisdictions, with a particular focus on education and prevention. The development of such a strategy is predicated on strong partnerships between governments and the community at large.

Through discussion among federal, provincial and territorial representatives, the following plan of action was developed.

2.0 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

2.1 The Nature and Extent of the Problem

Violence against women is an issue in the headlines every day. It takes a variety of forms including physical assault, sexual assault, psychological abuse and emotional abuse. Perpetrators of this violence can be known to the woman - her husband, friend, acquaintance, brother, uncle, employer - or can be a total stranger. Women are murdered by their husbands or male partners; assaulted by strangers in the street; sexually harassed by their employers or therapists; and disappear from their homes day after day.

Violence against women in Canadian society exists on a continuum which includes sexist jokes, pornography, sexual harassment, wife assault, sexual assault and murder.

It is generally recognized that women's experience of violence is not well captured by existing research. However, the following statistics and research do provide us with some sense of the magnitude of the problem.

- At least one in eight Canadian women is assaulted by her husband or live-in male partner.[1]
- One in four women will be sexually assaulted by a man at some point in her life.[2]
- A recent Gallup Poll indicated that 50 per cent of Canadian women are afraid to go out after dark in their own neighbourhoods.[3]
- One study indicates that over 50 per cent of Young Offenders charged with crimes against people had been exposed to domestic violence as children.[4]
- A recent study by the Ontario Native Women's Association reported that 80 per cent of Aboriginal women surveyed had been abused or assaulted.[5]
- Research studies indicate that between 68.5 per cent and 83 per cent of sexual assault victims know their abusers.[6]
- One U.S. study found that half of sexual assaults occur to women under age 17.[7]
- Approximately 60 per cent of all rapes take place in private homes.[8]

These figures provide only a snapshot of the extent and nature of the violence women face in our society.

2.2 The Impact of Violence on Women's Equality

The ability of women to achieve social, economic, legal and personal equality is seriously inhibited by the presence of widespread violence against women in Canadian society. It is not merely the incidence of violence against women which limits women's lives, but the fear of violence which affects their daily existence.

This violence affects every aspect of women's lives. How women dress, where they go, with whom they associate, their mode of transportation, are all governed by fear and precaution. Women normalize these precautionary measures to the point that they generally do not recognize the limitations and view them as nothing more than common sense.

Violence against women exacts high human costs in terms of the physical and mental health of women and children. For women, it often results in serious physical injuries, psychological and emotional trauma and death.

- One study in 1981 found that 61 per cent of women surveyed who were assaulted by their husbands were injured in the attack.[9]

- Victims of sexual assault are physically hurt in at least 60 per cent of cases.[10]

- Assaulted women also report a higher level of anxiety, somatic complaints and depression than women who are not assaulted.[11]

- One in five sexual assault victims attempt suicide.[12]

- In another study on suicide, of 225 suicide attempts, 83 per cent were made by abused women.[13]

- Compared to women who have not been abused as adults, 40 per cent more of battered women report use of drugs to sleep and 74 per cent more of battered women report use of drugs to relieve anxiety.[14]

Children who witness the assault of their mothers also suffer the consequences. They are at risk of being assaulted themselves, of developing adjustment problems during childhood and adolescence and of adopting and perpetrating this violent behaviour.

- In a recent Toronto study, children were present during 50.4 per cent of wife assault incidents. In 12.3 per cent of these incidents, the children were also physically assaulted.[15]

- Children exposed to wife assault have a level of adjustment problems comparable to that of children who are physically abused themselves.[16]

- Serious behaviour problems are 17 times higher for boys and 10 times higher for girls who have witnessed battering.[17]

Societal acceptance or tolerance of violence against women heightens its impact and insidiousness. Women too often continue to be held responsible for the violence perpetrated against them and as a result are often reluctant to seek assistance.

Further, women from doubly disadvantaged groups, such as low-income women, Aboriginal women, women who speak neither English nor French, immigrant women and women with disabilities have largely been overlooked in the development of services and programs to address the needs of women who have experienced violence in their lives.

Women who have been denied their basic right to security of the person, cannot participate equally in Canadian society.

3.0 THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The elimination of violence against women in Canadian society requires a co-ordinated, multi-facetted approach in order to deal with the attitudes towards violence and the causes and consequences of this violence.

While enhanced criminalization of these acts both deters offenders and sends the message to society that such violence will not be sanctioned, a single focus on enforcement ignores the fact that acts of violence against women remain largely unreported and this offers little support to women in their attempts to deal with the immediate and long-term effects of this violence on their lives.

Thus, an approach based on criminalization needs to be buttressed with the provision of support services to assist women and a broad public education thrust to effect the changes in public attitudes needed to sustain longer term benefits. Effective and appropriate programs for offenders are an important component in the effort to end violence against women.

Aboriginal and certain other communities draw attention to the fact that abusers themselves have often been abused and will continue to abuse until the healing process has begun.

The comprehensive approach articulated below includes initiatives dealing with prevention, law enforcement, services to victims and coordination. It is an approach that must be collaborative, where individuals, communities and governments must work together. Violence against women is everybody's concern and the commitment to eliminate it must come from all sectors of society.

This approach would be based on an evaluation model which, as well as outlining the problem, would identify the causes and factors which contribute to violence against women and would include activities chosen because of the cause-effect relationship between the objective, the activity and the expected results.

3.1 Prevention

Violence against women occurs every day in Canada. Research indicates that the number of women who can expect to experience violence is staggering. Stopping the violence **before** it starts must be a priority in a strategy to free women from violence. One key component of such an effort is public education.

Longstanding public attitudes have viewed violence against women as socially acceptable and less "serious" than other crimes. The victim is often blamed for the violence and excuses are found for the behaviour of the perpetrator. These attitudes both cause and perpetuate further violence.

Public education efforts, including broadly-based mass media campaigns, professional education and the education of children throughout the kindergarten to Grade 12 stream, are required to change negative attitudes and increase awareness of violence against women.

Prevention through public education may be achieved by supporting a range of programs and services including the following:

Schools, Colleges and Universities

- introducing or enhancing school curricula to: foster positive gender roles; teach children non-violent conflict resolution; and provide positive and healthy gender role models.

- assisting colleges and universities in curriculum development on the issues of violence against women to: break down negative stereotypes of women; encourage a greater sensitivity among those training for the human services professions; and foster academic research on the issue.

- adopting comprehensive sexual harassment policies and complaint procedures (see "Public Safety Practices", page 7 for related campus initiatives).

Research

- encouraging research and evaluation in such areas as the nature and incidence of violence against women and the effectiveness of policies, programs and intervention strategies.

- promoting opportunities for information dissemination and support efforts at database development and information collection on the issue of violence against women.

- examining further the links between violence against women and a number of health or social problems experienced by women such as substance abuse, eating disorders, depression.

Broadly-based Public Education

- establishing public education initiatives to foster a clearer understanding of the issue of violence against women. Effective programs might include the production of educational materials, pamphlets, posters, billboards and the use of mass media.

- encouraging and supporting the involvement and commitment of local communities in public education efforts.

- seeking to promote the positive portrayal of women in the media.

- promoting a better understanding of the negative effects of pornography on women in society.

- promoting research efforts aimed at determining public knowledge, awareness, attitudes and behaviours as well as the evaluation of the effectiveness of public education activities.

- seeking to involve a wide range of communities in the development and delivery of public education activities.

Professional Education

- promoting a better understanding of violence against women through training and/or sensitization of those whose responsibilities bring them in contact with women victims. This would include a broad range of service providers in the health, justice, education, social services systems and in a wide range of community-based services. It would also be important to ensure that healers and helpers be given the opportunity to heal themselves when there is need to do so.

- involving a wide range of communities including professional associations, labour and business groups in developing solutions.

Public Safety Practices

- The prevention of public acts of violence requires a variety of approaches and includes such areas as: design/planning, local community participation in crime prevention, public transportation and policing. Examples are:

  - assisting colleges and universities to develop safe and secure campuses for women through initiatives in such areas as design/planning, campus/community participation in crime prevention, public transportation and campus security;

  - undertaking initiatives such as demonstration projects by municipalities and safe city design and reviews of urban planning processes, to provide safe and secure communities for all women to live in.

3.2 Enforcement

Violence against women - including wife assault and sexual assault - is a crime and punishable under the law. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of using criminal justice intervention in deterring offenders from future violent acts.

- The majority of women who have gone to court report a reduction or termination of violence after court.[18]

- Further, when the police rather than the victim lay charges, the probability of new incidents of violence is reduced by half.[19]

Enforcement of the criminal nature of violence against women also serves an important public education function. It sends the message to perpetrators and the general public that these incidents are punishable crimes that cannot and will not be tolerated by society.

However, in the past, the justice system's response to crimes of violence against women has been problematic. Traditionally, the justice system's response to sexual assault has been predicated on the erroneous belief that women fabricate stories of sexual assault, which leads to the prosecution of innocent men. Further, wife assault has generally been treated as a family matter between a husband and wife, not as the criminal offence it is. Too, in most cases, women are blamed for the violence they experience; they are viewed as being in some way responsible for the assault against them. Finally, the response of the criminal justice system has often created secondary victimization of women victims.

Improving the capacity of the criminal justice system to investigate and successfully prosecute cases of sexual assault and wife assault and to provide effective correctional programs for offenders may be achieved by supporting such enforcement initiatives as the following:

Police Charging Policies

- in accordance with their jurisdictional responsibilities, establishing, enforcing and monitoring charging policies which require police or other authorities to lay charges in all cases of wife assault where reasonable and probable grounds exist to believe an offence has been committed.

- undertaking a similar enhanced enforcement approach in cases of sexual assault with a particular focus on providing an appropriate and sensitive response to women in all cases of sexual assault, including those where the perpetrator is known to the victim.

Training

- providing training programs for justice professionals including police, Crown Attorneys and correctional staff on the issue of violence against women in order to sensitize them to the unique difficulties involved in handling these cases.

- encouraging the Canadian Judicial Education Centre and comparable provincial bodies responsible for judicial education to include information sessions on violence against women.

Assistance to Victims

- undertaking a review of policing, court and correctional policies and procedures to determine their responsiveness to the needs of victims for support, protection, information and input into the justice system.

- promoting and supporting the establishment of programs designed to provide support services and information to victims/witnesses of wife assault and sexual assault to help them with the special difficulties and pressures they face in the criminal justice system.

Male Offender Programs

- encouraging the development of effective programs for abusive men and sex offenders in communities and/or institutions with the goals of making men accountable for their behaviour and stopping their violence against women.

Research

- encouraging research, data collection and evaluation of these justice initiatives in order to ensure that the justice system is responding appropriately and effectively in cases involving violence against women (including cases of wife assault and sexual assault).

3.3 Services

The provision of adequate support services for assaulted women and their children is necessary to help women to deal successfully with both the immediate crisis and the longer term impact created by the violence perpetrated against them.

With respect to service delivery, it is also important to recognize the diversity across Canada in relation to social, cultural, economic and demographic environments. Disability, language, culture, and geography must not become barriers to service and therefore add unnecessarily to the burden of violence. Consequently, services must be developed in a manner appropriate to the needs of women who speak neither English nor French, Aboriginal women, racial minority and immigrant/refugee women, women with disabilities, older women, low-income women and women in rural and/or remote communities.

Efforts integral to the provision of effective support to victims include the following:

Emergency and Crisis Services

- providing support to Sexual Assault Care Centres and Rape Crisis Centres to assist women in dealing with the immediate effects of a sexual assault including health care needs and crisis counselling.

- supporting shelters designed to provide emergency accommodation and crisis services for battered women and their children.

- ensuring a responsive service on the part of health care providers such as physicians, community health workers, etc.

Support and Training of Staff and Volunteers

- promoting the training of health, education and social services professionals in the issue of violence against women to increase their sensitivity to and understanding of the effects of violence (both wife assault and sexual assault) in women's lives and the lives of their children.

- recognizing that boards of directors of shelters, rape crisis centres/sexual assault centres and other women's crisis services need support to carry out their responsibilities.

Community Counselling Services

- supporting counselling programs in a variety of community settings for clients who identify a history of sexual assault or wife assault.

Housing Initiatives

- encouraging the development of housing initiatives, including the construction of affordable housing and second stage housing, to provide housing options to assaulted women and their children who have left their abusive partners.

3.4 Coordination

The value of coordination within and among the federal, provincial, territorial and local levels in the implementation of initiatives to eliminate violence against women cannot be underestimated. The exchange of information facilitated by multi-level coordination allows for the most efficient and effective use of limited resources in dealing with this complex problem.

Women who have been victimized may have social or health problems or specific housing, vocational or other needs which must be addressed in order to become self-supporting. This requires the participation of a range of community-based services in a coordinated service delivery process.

Professionals, volunteers, community-based groups, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, labour and the corporate sector working together would ensure a concerted and integrated effort.

Examples of coordination include the following:

- encouraging local communities to organize and coordinate local activities and services related to violence against women. Community activities would include liaison with governments, needs identification, program evaluation, analysis of trends, the identification of service gaps, information and resource sharing and public education;

- establishing committees composed of relevant government departments, ministries and/or agencies, to undertake the coordination of policy programs and services related to violence against women within their respective jurisdictions. Activities could include policy development, program development, public education, research and evaluation and information sharing;

- establishing and participating in regular federal, provincial, territorial meetings on the issue of violence against women for the purposes of information-sharing and issue identification.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The human and financial consequences of violence against women are enormous. The long-term impact on women, on society in general and on the economy, of not responding to the needs of female victims of violence - and to their children - can no longer be borne.

Public awareness of the reality of violence against women has been heightened following such stark events as the massacre of 14 women in Montreal and the recent disappearances and murders of women across the country. Women's consciousness of the threat of violence in their everyday lives has also been heightened.

The framework presented here for a National Strategy on Violence Against Women provides for a coordinated approach to this issue. The adoption of this framework will reinforce the federal, provincial and territorial governments' concrete commitment to gender equality by assuring security of the person for women.

The framework for action is a crucial component to the overall effort aimed at eliminating violence against women in Canadian society. If adopted, the measures outlined here will begin to break down a significant barrier to the achievement of equality by the women of Canada.

ENDNOTES

1. Linda MacLeod, Battered but Not Beaten: Preventing Wife Battering in Canada. Ottawa: The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1987.

2. J. Brickman and J. Briere, "Incidence of Rape and Sexual Assault in an Urban Canadian Population", The International Journal of Women's Studies, 7 (3), 1984.

3. Results from a Gallup Poll released April 20, 1990. Results based on 1,054 personal interviews with adults, 18 years and older, conducted March 7 - 10, 1990.

4. Peter Jaffe, Annual Report. London Family Court Clinic. London: 1987.

5. Ontario Native Women's Association, Breaking Free: A Proposal for Change for Aboriginal Family Violence. Thunder Bay: Ontario Native Women's Association, 1989.

6. J. Brickman and J. Briere, "Incidence of Rape and Sexual Assault in an Urban Canadian Population", The International Journal of Women's Studies. 7 (3), 1984 and D. Russell, Sexual Exploitation: Rape, Child Abuse and Workplace Harassment. Beverley Hills: Sage, 1984.

7. D. Russell, Sexual Exploitation: Rape, Child Abuse and Workplace Harassment. Beverley Hills: Sage, 1984.

8. D. Kinnon, Report on Sexual Assault in Canada. Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women: Ottawa, 1981.

9. Solicitor General of Canada, "Female Victims of Crime", Canadian Urban Victimization Bulletin 4. Ottawa: Ministry of the Solicitor General, 1985.

10. Ibid.

11. Peter Jaffe, "The Emotional and Physical Health Problems of Battered Women," Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 31, October, 1986.

12. E. Stark, "The Psychological Aftermath," Psychology Today, February, 1985.

13. "Marriage and Divorce Today: The Professional Newsletter for Family Therapy Practitioners", 10, no.9, October, 1984.

14. J. Groeneveld and M. Shain, Drug Abuse Among Victims of Physical and Sexual Abuse: A Preliminary Report. Toronto: Addiction Research Foundation, 1989.

15. Barry Leighton, Spousal Abuse in Metropolitan Toronto: Research Report on the Response of the Criminal Justice System. Ottawa: Ministry of the Solicitor General of Canada, 1989.

16. Peter Jaffe et al, "Similarities in Behavioural and Social Maladjustment Among Child Victims and Witnesses to Family Violence", American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 50, 1986.

17. D. Wolfe et al, "Children of Battered Women: The Relation of Child Behaviour to Family Violence and Maternal Stress", Journal of Clinical and Consulting Psychology 53, 1985.

18. Peter Jaffe et al, A Research Study to Evaluate the Impact and Effectiveness of the Policy Directive that Police Lay Charges in All Domestic Violence Incidents Where Reasonable and Probable Grounds Exist. Toronto: Provincial Secretariat for Justice, 1985.

19. Ibid.